An Intertextual Study of Ironies From Father-Daughter Conflicts in *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*

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As one of Shakespeare’s four great tragedies, *King Lear* stands as a classic masterpiece firmly in world literary history. The Lear story goes through many retellings, among which Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* proves to be a successful one. Though exhibited from different perspectives, the two stories have something in common—the ironies arising from father-daughter conflicts. In the way of an intertextual comparison, the paper analyzes the ironies from father-daughter conflicts with an aim of digging out deep meaning from behind in a new angle. It finds out that the ironies shared by the two works help to increase the tragic atmosphere and reveal a lot of truths underneath the lines.

*Keywords:* intertextual, *King Lear*, *A Thousand Acres*, irony, father-daughter, conflict

**Introduction**

William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is recognized unanimously as one of the best tragedies in the world. In fact, the story of Lear can date back to Celtic mythology in 1136 and later goes through different versions, such as John Higgins’s *The First Part of the Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), William Warner’s *Albion’s England* (1586), Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590), and *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605). William Shakespeare makes great alterations to the source story in terms of content, structure, even endings, etc., and thus creates a worldwide known tragedy in literary history. However, the retelling of the story never stops. The story continues in various versions, such as Nahum Tate’s *King Lear* (1681), Gordon Bottomley’s *King Lear’s Wife* (1920), Edward Bond’s *Lear* (1971), and Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991). As the first female writer to adapt the Lear story, Smiley brings fresh female perspective and imagination into the story and retells the story through the mouth of the eldest daughter Ginny (Goneril in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*). It turns out to be a big success. *A Thousand Acres* won Smiley National Book Critics Circle Award in 1991 and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1992. The novel receives a lot of positive reviews as well, such as in *Vogue*, the comment goes like this:

> A studied, ingenious variation on the brutal clashing of sexes and generations in *King Lear*. Its style is relaxed, conversational, unhurried; the novel flows gently onwards like a broad river. In its solidity and poise, *A Thousand Acres* is a book that will outlast this year’s rainy season. (Smiley, 2008, preface)
From *Washington Post*, the comment is,

> A near miraculous success… While Smiley has written beautifully about families in all of her preceding books, her latest effort is her best; a family portrait that is also a near-epic investigation into the broad landscape, the thousand dark acres, of the human heart. The book has all the stark brutality of a Shakespearean tragedy. (Smiley, 2008, preface)

*A Thousand Acres’* part consistency to and part variation from *King Lear* arouse the reader’s interest in the intention and implications of the novel as well as a reconsideration of their former interpretation of the drama. Such relationship between the two books is considered as intertextuality, a term coined by French poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966 based on Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics and Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin’s dialogism. According to Kristeva’s teacher, a French literary theorist and linguist, Roland Barthes,

> Every text has its meaning, therefore, in relation to the other texts. As we shall see throughout this study, this relationality can itself be figured in various ways: it can involve the radical plurality of the sign, the relation between signs and texts and the cultural text, the relation between a text and literary system, or the transformative relation between one text and another text. (Allen, 2000, p. 6)

Although intertextuality has undergone different definitions and interpretations over the time,

> …it reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader’s own presupposition, lacking in clear and defined boundaries, and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic “voices” which exist within society. A term which continually refers to the impossibility of singularity, unity and thus of unquestionable authority, intertextuality remains a potent tool within any reader’s theoretical vocabulary. (Allen, 2000, p. 209)

Therefore, the paper wants to analyze *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* in the intertextual angle and discover something new. The researches in this field still have sufficient room. Domestically, there’re only two papers concerned: Zhang Gexin’s “How does *A Thousand Acres* Evolve out of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*” published in *Science and Technology Information* in 2010; and He Wenxiu’s thesis “An Intertextual Study of *A Thousand Acres*” in 2011. The related articles overseas are: “Contemporary Retellings: *A Thousand Acres* as the Latest Lear” by James A. Schiff, published in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* in 1998; and Marina Leslie’s “Incest, Incorporation, and King Lear in Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*” published in *College English* in 1998. In fact both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* are great tragedies at different times. There are many differences between the two works, such as a difference of perspective mentioned by James as this:

> In Shakespeare’s play Goneril is viewed from a distance; we never gain access to the inner workings of her consciousness, and she appears cold, ungrateful, and aggressively hostile … Ginny is placed at the center of the novel in the role of narrator. … Smiley makes us aware not only of an alternative version to the story but also of how our Western literary tradition has tended to honor the patriarch at the expense of the daughters. (Schiff, 1998, p. 373)

However, for all those differences, the tragic effects in both the two works, to a large extent, derive from the ironies hidden in the stories. Among those ironies, the ironies from the conflicts between the father and his daughters are most impressive. There’s no research, up till now, in the intertextual study of ironies in the two works yet. The paper goes to make an intertextual analysis of those ironies out of father-daughter conflicts reflected in the two works so as to find out the similarities of and the differences between them, and to dig out a deep understanding of the two works from a different angle.
The Ironies From Early Conflicts Between the Father and His Youngest Daughter

Irony, “in its broadest sense, is a rhetorical device, literary technique, or event in which what appears, on the surface, to be the case, differs radically from what is actually the case. Irony may be divided into categories such as: verbal, dramatic, and situational. …The American Heritage Dictionary’s secondary meaning for irony: ‘incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs.’”¹ Despite the various types of irony, here in this paper it mainly analyzes two types of ironies: one is dramatic irony, and the other is situational irony. Dramatic irony is “a plot device according to which (a) the spectators know more than the protagonist; (b) the character reacts in a way contrary to that which is appropriate or wise; (c) characters or situations are compared or contrasted for ironic effects, such as parody; or (d) there is a marked contrast between what the character understands about his acts and what the play demonstrates about them. …It is most often used when the author causes a character to speak or act erroneously, out of ignorance of some portion of the truth of which the audience is aware. In tragic irony, the audience knows the character is making a mistake, even as the character is making it.”² In Shakespeare’s four great tragedies, dramatic irony often works in creating tragic atmosphere. As to situational irony, it refers to “the disparity of intention and result; when the result of an action is contrary to the desired or expected effect.”³ In many stories, the ending is often unexpected and different from the beginning.

In *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*, the most obvious ironies lie in the conflicts between the father and his daughters. It is through these ironies that Shakespeare and Smiley reveal some truths to the reader. In both the two books, with the development of the story, different ironies arise at different stages. First are the ironies from the conflicts between the father and his youngest daughter.

As a father of three daughters, both King Lear and Larry Cook enjoy definite authority and great power over their kingdoms at the beginning of the two stories—one is the king of Britain, while the other is the most renowned farmer and the owner of the largest land of a thousand acres in Zebulon County, America. Both the aging fathers declare publicly a division of their assets into three parts for their three daughters without any negotiations with them beforehand. Facing the negative and non-cooperative response from their favorite youngest daughters—Cordelia’s “Nothing, my lord” (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 422) and Caroline’s “I don’t know” (Smiley, 2008, p. 19), the fathers feel hurt and deprive the youngest daughters of their right of inheritance right away.

It seems generous and selfless for the father to allocate his possessions among his children. However what’s behind it deserves our attention. There’re not enough democratic communication and understanding between the father and the daughters. On the one hand, in both the two stories, the distribution of property is declared suddenly in public. To divide a family’s possessions (even a kingdom) is a big issue, but such a vital declaration is made without a discussion with the children ahead of time. The decision is only the father’s. As we can see, in patriarchal society, it’s the family tradition for daughters to follow the father’s orders, including this one. The father alone can make every decision for the family at will, just like the king can make every decision for the country alone. Just as the monarchy system rejects a democratic relationship between the king and his ministers, the patriarchal and paternalistic relationship hinders a democratic communication between

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the father and the daughters, whether it’s in Shakespeare’s time or in Smiley’s time. On the other hand, in both the stories, the rash condemnation of the youngest daughter and merciless abolishment of her right of succession prove a lack of understanding between the father and daughters.

Take *King Lear* for example. Lear, being a king and a father at the same time, is used to taking charge and giving commands. Because of his approaching old age and a prevention of future strife among children, Lear decides to divide and distribute the kingdom to his three daughters. He requires his daughters to claim their love for him publicly before receiving their portions. It’s really ironic for a father to “exchange” his possessions with required loving words from his daughters. Lear doesn’t know what love is, neither does he know his daughters, for the basic respect is absent in the family. His first two daughters Goneril and Regan cater for Lear’s needs to be respected and flattered, while the youngest one Cordelia refuses such a “trade”. Lear’s arrogance and narcissism blind him so that he doesn’t figure out the reasons for his daughter’s seeming non-cooperation and see her true heart. He blames Cordelia for her pride, abruptly cuts off the father-daughter relationship and abrogates her right of inheriting a third part of the kingdom. Here the dramatic irony is that Lear rarely realizes his own pride and tyranny. He makes judgments only through superficial words rather than probing the depth. He longs for daughters’ love but knows little about how to love. When disobeyed by Cordelia, he resorts to extremely ruthless resolution as punishment, which is far from the essence of love.

The same ironies go to Larry Cook in *A Thousand Acres*. At a pig roast prepared by the neighbor farmer competitor Harold Clark (Gloucester) to welcome the return of his eldest son Jess Clark (Edmund) after his leaving for thirteen years, Larry, out of a sudden, declares his plan of establishing a corporation, with all the shares of the thousand acres divided among his three daughters—Ginny, Rose and Caroline. His explanation is that he is too old for running the farm and this arrangement can avoid seven or eight hundred thousand dollars inheritance taxes in the future. Out of habitual obedience to the father, the eldest daughter Ginny responds positively and agrees with her father, followed by the second daughter Rose. The third daughter Caroline, a lawyer in the town, doubts it. Her hesitating answer leads to Larry’s irritation and abandonment—“You don’t want it, my girl, you’re out. It’s as simple as that” (Smiley, 2008, p. 21). When Larry makes a decision, he takes it for granted that his daughters should support and follow it. He is too tyrannical and haughty to go deep into his daughters’ hearts and to tolerate any objection. He loves Caroline most, but throws her away once she refuses to abide by his decision. Here the father’s love is so ironic and fragile. Larry doesn’t feel anything wrong with himself till the end of the novel. It’s always the others that should be responsible for what happens. That is also a dramatic irony about Larry in the story.

**The Ironies From Later Conflicts Between the Father and His Two Elder Daughters**

Besides the ironies in the early conflicts between the father and the youngest daughter, there’re still ironies in the later conflicts between the father and the other two daughters. As a matter of fact, the conflicts arise from the authority-transferring from the father to the daughters.

In *King Lear*, since Lear already gives his kingdom to his two daughters, it’s natural for his daughters to be in charge and make decisions thereafter. Nevertheless, Lear still wants to control his daughters and leads the same glorious life as before. The seeming argument between Lear and his two elder daughters is about how many knights are in need to follow Lear, but the key problem is who has the say and who has to obey. The problem is first disclosed by Goneril’s complaints:
By day and night he wrongs me! Every hour
He flashes into one gross crime or other
That sets us all at odds. I’ll not endure it.
His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
On every trifle…
If he distaste it, let him to my sister,
Whose mind and mine, I know, in that are one,
Not to be overruled. Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away! … (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 437)

What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you? (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 476)

Similarly, Regan also persuades Lear to admit his weakening power:

O, sir, you are old;
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of his confine. You should be ruled and led
By some discretion that discerns your state
Better than you yourself. … (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 471)

Confronting Goneril’s rebellious attitude, Lear curses her in an extreme way:

Hear, Nature, hear! Dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility;
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
With cadent tears fret channels her cheeks,
Turn all her mother’s pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is
To have a thankless child! Away, away! (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 447)

Realizing that neither Goneril nor Regan supports his insistence on being followed by one hundred knights and that both of them are no longer submissive as before, Lear shouts:

And let not women’s weapons, water drops,
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I’ll have such revenges on you both… (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 476)

As we can see from the above, the reason for Lear to have one hundred knights to follow him is, to some extent, a reluctance of giving up all his power. The daughters are ready to take care of the old father, but no longer willing to live under his control. The authority has been transferred since the day when Lear divides his kingdom and allocates it to his two elder daughters. However, Lear keeps on denying the fact and lives in his
dream. That is a dramatic irony. In addition, Lear curses his own daughter in such a cruel way, which forms a sharp contrast to his earlier generosity to his daughters. At the same time, the stormy conflicts between Lear and his daughters also form a sharp contrast to the earlier harmonious relationship between them, which is a situational irony. The Lear story in Shakespeare’s hand ends as a tragedy with so many characters’ deaths: Gloucester, Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, Cordelia, Edmund, Lear, and some others. The deaths of the father and all his three daughters end the conflicts among them, which is absolutely a situational irony if considering the united family and kingdom they live in together at the beginning.

It is the same with the ironies in *A Thousand Acres*. After Larry entrusted one thousand acres to his two elder daughters, what he does all day long is idling about the streets in his car, drinking and drunken driving everywhere, waiting for his eldest daughter Ginny to prepare dishes for him just like before, and giving orders to Ginny without any negotiation. The conflicts increase when Ginny begins awakening, and gains more and more courage in front of her father Larry. The father’s authority is gradually dwindling and a daughter’s right to speak is taking shape. Here is the conversation between Larry and Ginny, which is a case in point:

…I made myself say, “I don’t think you can say that we’re lazy. Anyway, I don’t think you show us any respect, Daddy. I don’t think you ever think about anything from our point of view.”

“You don’t, huh? I bust my butt working all my life and I make a good place for you and your husband to live on, with a nice house and good income, hard times or good times, and you think I should be stopping all the time and wondering about your, what did you call it, your ‘point of view’?” (Smiley, 2008, p. 175)

Larry takes it for granted that his daughters should follow whatever he asks, just like what he reiterates—“You girls should listen to me” (Smiley, 2008, p. 176). However, Larry couldn’t resist getting old and losing authority, neither could he avert his daughters’ awakening and rebellion. The conflicts between Larry and his two elder daughters result from Larry’s refusal to give up his tyrannical power and the daughters’ strengthening independence. The pitiful thing is that Larry sticks to the old way and old thinking, refuses to change and listen, and despises his daughters’ opinions and emotions. He doesn’t realize his own problems till the very end, which is greatly ironic.

The conflict between them soars to the peak on a stormy night, which is similar to the famous stormy scene in *King Lear*, when the father curses his daughter Ginny:

He leaned his face toward mine. “You don’t have to drive me around any more, or cook the goddamned breakfast or clean the goddamned house.” His voice modulated into a scream. “Or tell me what I can do and what I can’t do. You barren whore! I know all about you, you slut. You’ve been creeping here and there all your life, making up to this one and that one. But you’re not really a woman, are you? I don’t know what you are, just a bitch, is all, just a dried-up whore bitch.” I admit that I was transfixed; yes, I thought, this is what he’s been thinking all these years, waiting to say it. (Smiley, 2008, p. 181)

It’s really hard to imagine that those harsh words come from a father’s mouth. Larry’s curses are doubtlessly a sharp contrast to his earlier deed of bestowing his daughters a thousand acres’ land, which is definitely a situational irony. The violent confrontation is also a situational irony to the former seemingly peaceful Cook family with a powerful father and obedient daughters. However, the ironies don’t stop here, but rocket when a past crime committed by Larry is uncovered through a conversation between Ginny and Rose. When Ginny is fifteen and Rose is thirteen, Larry starts threatening, sexually harassing and raping them respectively for several years. Ginny does not remember the shameful scenes with her father when she grows
up due to selective amnesia. She even can’t believe it when Rose discusses it with her for the first time on that stormy night when their father curses and runs away. After Rose’s reminding and Ginny’s own reminiscence, those terrible pictures in the past finally loom up in Ginny’s mind and wake up her paralytic body:

One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body… And so my father came to me and had intercourse with me in the middle of the night. I could remember pretending to be asleep, but knowing he was in the doorway and moving closer. I could remember him saying, “Quiet, now, girl. You don’t need to fight me.” …I remembered his weight, the feeling of his knee pressing between my legs, while I tried to make my legs heavy without seeming to defy him. …I remembered that he carried a lot of smells—whiskey, cigarette smoke, the sweeter and sourer smells of the farm work. I remembered, over and over again, what the top of his head looked like. But I never remembered penetration or pain, or even his hands on my body, and I never sorted out how many times there were. I remembered my strategy, which had been desperate limp inertia. (Smiley, 2008, p. 280)

Throughout the whole story, neither Ginny nor Rose has any chance to confront their father on this crime. On the contrary, the daughters are sued by their father under the help of the youngest daughter Caroline. When Larry calls his own daughter a “whore”, he doesn’t remember his own incestuous misdeed. His ignorance of his past crimes and his over-strictness and rudeness to his daughters form another dramatic irony. Furthermore, most neighbors show mercy to Larry, an old man seemingly driven out by his daughters into a storm at night. Since Ginny and Rose are not willing to spread the family scandal to the others, the neighbors have no access to the truth. Larry’s crime can never be disclosed to the world. The most ironic thing is that even after Ginny tells her husband Ty (Albany) about her father’s abuse of her, Ty never believes so. In some sense, the patriarchal society shields the voices from women, neglects their contribution, and doubts their minds, just like what Ginny protests to her separated husband Ty:

You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? (Smiley, 2008, pp. 342-343)

It is not only the father Larry alone, but also the whole society over a long history that creates this tragic irony. Until his death, Larry doesn’t feel guilty about the past and even chooses to forget it. It’s a dramatic irony for him, and thus intensifies a pathetic shadow over the whole story, which ends with an understated sadness—

I can’t say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, prickling him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others. (Smiley, 2008, p. 371)

Leslie makes a comment on the passage as this: “This passage poignantly captures the difficulty of the incest survivor. Forgetting is a king of death, but then so also is remembering” (Marina, 1998, p. 48). With the deaths of Pete (Cornwall), Larry, and Rose, a divorce of Ginny and Ty, and a loss of the one-thousand-acre land, the story also ends in a tragic way. The conflicts between the father and daughters as well as the conflicts between daughters themselves (the sisterhood conflicts aren’t mentioned in the paper yet) end. In view of the beginning pig toast and a description of a thousand acres’ land owned by the Cooks, the ending is undoubtedly a situational irony.
Conclusion

To sum up, both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* share many ironies despite some differences in the plot, perspective and significance. The conflicts between the father and his three daughters go through the whole story, where a lot of ironies are hidden. In both the two works, the early conflicts between the father and his youngest daughter reveal the dramatic irony about the father’s ignorance and arrogance, while the later conflicts between the father and his two elder daughters contain not only the dramatic irony about the father’s continuing ignorance of his own follies and vices, but also the situational irony of a reversed father-daughter relationship. It is just through those ironies that a tragic tone is strengthened. Through an intertextual analysis of those ironies from the father-daughter conflicts, a new window is opened for the reader to review the two stories and gain some fresh insights.

References